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WITHOUT SOVEREIGNTY, WITHOUT BEING:
UNCONDITIONALITY, THE COMING GOD AND
DERRIDA'S DEMOCRACY TO COME

Extracts of this article have previously been published in France Today, the Journal of French Travel and Culture, <<http://www.francetoday.com/>>.

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IS THERE SOMETHING “unconditional” that is nonetheless without “sovereignty?” Is there something that makes an unconditional claim without laying claim to unconditional force or power? Is there something that, even if it were a certain power or force, would be at most a “force without force” or a “power of powerlessness?”

Is there something unconditional that would neither *be* nor be *something*? Does the unconditional resist the very language of being in which we pose this question? Might it be that the unconditional would not really have a seat in being, that the conditions that obtain in being would be no match for the unconditional? Might it be that whatever has being can come to be only under certain conditions while the unconditional would somehow be otherwise than being, a kind of demi-being, almost like a ghost, almost nothing?

But if something unconditional happens, without sovereignty and without being, without force and without power, would it have the wherewithal to transform us, to turn us around, to make us new? Would it, could it, be something truly revolutionary, or would it lie lame and lifeless and ineffective? Could something be revolutionary without having revolutionary power? Could something that is at best a “weak force” (*force faible*) be strong enough to save us?

That is the cluster of questions that Jacques Derrida has been raising of late, questions that strike at the heart of some of our fondest and most unquestioned presuppositions.¹ Deep and probing questions, even matters of ultimate concern, Paul Tillich might have said, in any case very far from the “relativism” with which he is wrongly charged (V, 13). But for all that these are also highly topical and contemporary questions, as contemporary as September 11, questions that

Derrida raises in the midst of the most concrete politics of the day, of the “war on terrorism” and the “rogue states,” of national sovereignty, international law and the United Nations.

Imagine an analogy – or a symbiosis – among the soul, the state and the universe. That is a venerable and prestigious premise that goes back as far as Plato’s *Republic*, one that has guided our thinking ever since antiquity. Just as there is but one God in Heaven, the Father (sic) Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, governing the universe, so the analogy goes there is but one King governing the state (and one father governing the family), and so, finally, each man (sic) is the lord of his own actions. We modern democrats congratulate ourselves on having revolutionized this schema, having turned it upside down, by ridding it of its top-down power structure. We have shown the king the door (or even handed him his head) and replaced him with a constitutional democracy, according to which power rises from the bottom up. We have gradually gotten around to giving the vote to every adult citizen, regardless of race or gender, propertied or not. Let there be no mistake: that was no little achievement for which we are grateful and which, even today, is far from finished. We have even gotten around to God and made God a lot more gender sensitive and egalitarian and much less patriarchal. So the revolution has seemed more or less complete, at least in principle.

But the truth is, while we have inverted the old schema, turning it on its head, by giving power to the people, we have not slipped free of its most basic presupposition, that of sovereignty itself, which goes unchallenged. Modern democracies have considered the revolution complete – at least in principle, as one will never be finished making this actually work – if they repopulate the sovereign center with the people, running the lines of power from the bottom up. Consider that, even though they separate church and state, modern democracies, spawned in the “Enlightenment,” are run by the light of what Kant called “autonomy.” Autonomy means answering only to a law (*nomos*) that you give yourself (*autos*), which is the only way to be “rational” for Kant, which means not to allow your reason to be overwhelmed by an alien power. That model is the secularized cousin of a theological image of God Almighty, the brightest light, the most autonomous agent, and the most serene and sovereign freedom of all. Just as Carl Schmitt, the conservative political philosopher, defines the sovereign in terms of his power to suspend the law and to make an exception of himself (V, 211-12), so, in its most extreme formulations, in the eleventh century theologian Peter Damian, for example, the omnipotence of God is such that God has the power to suspend the laws of reason, even to the point of changing the past, to make it to be that what happened (that the city of Rome was founded) had not happened, were God so minded. So, on this point at least, our modern democracies are continuous with the *ancien régime*, with monarchies and

aristocracies and oligarchies and the old ontotheologies, all of which rely upon some version of a completely classical schema of God the Father, of “the theological idea of sovereignty.”² While they have shifted the rule (*kratia*) from a sovereign one or few to the people (*demos*), no mean achievement, our modern democracies have left the space of sovereignty and autonomy undisturbed. So now mighty nation-states stride the earth where once mighty kings inspired fear and trembling – and having the power to inspire fear and trembling, to terrorize, is built right into the idea of sovereignty (V, 214).

Autonomy is a perfect circle, beginning and ending in the self. That is what a sovereign democracy wants to be. Everything begins and ends in the people, in a government of the people, by the people, for the people – under God, who is an even more perfect, powerful and prestigious circle. A democracy makes a perfect return upon itself (V, 31, 34). Whatever goes out from the people comes back to the people, like the “going out” (*exitus*) and “return” (*reditus*) of God in Christian Neoplatonism or Aristotle’s prime mover. One nation, under God: after a sovereign God comes the sovereign nation or people. But must a democracy be a sovereignty? Or is the very idea of sovereignty incompatible with a true or radical democracy? Might it be that wherever democracy tries to come, sovereignty would have to go? Do we not require a *new* democratic revolution, not a revolution *to* democracy but a revolution *in* democracy, one that turns the screw of democracy once again and thereby turns it *into* democracy?

¹ Derrida takes up these issues in several places, most recently in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. with commentary by Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), hereafter PTT, and in *Voyous* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), hereafter “V” (in brackets in the body of the text). For “weak force” (*force faible*) see V, 13. See also “The University without Condition,” in Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, ed. and trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 202-37, where Derrida which describes a university which, while it does not exist, is structured by the unconditional right to ask any question. It offers resistance, even a “force” of resistance, of dissidence and disobedience, to the order of being – to the powers that be, to sovereign states, to economic powers, and to the powers of the media, the church, the popular culture, etc. (204). But since this unconditionality has never existed, this invincible university is impotent, very vulnerable to the influence of power. The humanities are be the privileged place in which this unconditional freedom would be theorized and presented. The freedom, autonomy (213-14), or “immunity” (220) of the university does not make for a sovereign university (235), since sovereignty has to do with power and the real order. The task of the university then is neither to acquire external power nor to withdraw into the interior of an inner and unconditional freedom, but to negotiate the difference between the two, to move back and forth between the conditional and the unconditional in such a way as to “resist effectively, by allying itself with extra-academic forces, in order to organize an inventive resistance” to all the figures of sovereignty (236). That also means the “university” is not to be identified with a physical campus, but it is found wherever the voice of this dangerous perhaps poses the possibility of the impossible. Nor does he think that the philosophers of the future are necessarily to be found in philosophy departments or even in the academy (PTT, 106).

² “University,” 235. See also PTT, 111, 124. Derrida says that he doubts that the “value of sovereignty can be completely secularized or de-theologized.” (PTT, 113).

However secular modern democracies think they are or have become, the truth is that secularization always presupposes a theology to secularize, so that, for better or for worse, secularism is the continuation of theology by another means. There is always what Derrida calls "some unavowed theologeme" (V, 155), a certain bit of undigested theology lodged in the throat of even the most secular societies. Without deciding what is the controlling element in this symbiotic system, it is clear that a certain idea of God is a traveling companion of our understanding of ourselves and a certain understanding of the social system and that sovereignty is the "heritage of a barely secularized theology."³ The undecidability here is archaic; it goes all the way down. Are we made in the image of God, or is God made in our image? Are both God and self simply reflections of the dominant social systems, or might it be that social systems give outward expression to a deeper preunderstanding of self and God? How would we know that? Where would we be standing when we pronounced that decision? How would we have gotten clear of the dominant social system, self-understanding or inherited theological presuppositions long enough to resolve that fluctuation? It is enough to describe the symbiosis without attempting to find its law. So if any effort to radicalize democracy, to carry the revolution one step further, would involve extricating democracy from the politics of sovereignty altogether, then in whatever direction the symbiotic fluids flow, the coming of the democracy to come must be accompanied by a new coming of God, by a new God to come. A radical democratic revolution would not mean jettisoning theology once and for all and a final accomplishment of secularization, but rather a parallel radicalization of theology.

But what would be it like to rid ourselves of the theology, the politics and the anthropology of sovereignty? What would it be like to refashion theology around a God without sovereignty, to refashion a politics without sovereign nation states, and to refashion our self-understanding in terms of a self without sovereign ipseity? These are all limit concepts, imponderables, paradoxes, the very stuff that feeds and nourishes deconstruction, just the sort of aporetic element in which deconstruction thrives. Can we imagine the "coming" of a God without sovereignty, Derrida asks.⁴ "Nothing is less sure, of course, than a god

³ Derrida, "University," 207.

⁴ In a Roundtable at the "Religion and Postmodernism 3" conference, held at Villanova in September, 2001, Derrida said: "We usually identify God with the almighty, that is, with absolute power. I'm trying now in seminars and in texts, by following a political thread, to deconstruct, so to speak, the onto-theological politics of sovereignty. God is supposed to be absolutely powerful in our tradition. I don't know if it is Christian or not. I'm trying to think of some unconditionality that would not be sovereign, that is, to deconstruct the theological heritage of the concept, the political concept, of sovereignty, without abandoning the unconditionality of gifts, of hospitality, and so on. That means that some unconditionality might be associated not with power but with weakness, with powerlessness. Now some would say this is still Christian. There is in Jesus Christ some weakness,

without sovereignty, nothing is less sure than his coming, of course." (V, 161) To thus imagine God would be as difficult—as impossible—as trying to think of the coming of a self without the ipseity of the self, the *per se* or *a se* subsistence of one who is the lord of one's own domain. Would we not then be flirting with a God who would hardly be God, who would hardly be, a God without being or without being God (*Dieu sans l'être*) and a self that would not be itself, a self without being a self, *soi sans l'être*? And would not a nation without national sovereignty be a poor excuse for a nation, a nation without nationhood, *l'état sans l'être*, without manhood? God forbid (V, 161)!

In *Voyous*, Derrida raises these questions—tackling the whole chain or symbiotic system of sovereignty—in a deeply political context, to which we will return below. Suffice it for the moment to note that the French word *voyou*, perhaps derived from *voie*, means a street runner, a hooligan, or riff-raff, is used to translate an Americanism: *les états voyous* are the "rogue states." Why take on such formidable opponents? Why try to wipe away the entire horizon? Because Derrida thinks the very idea of "sovereignty" is undemocratic. "The abuse of power is constitutive of the idea of sovereignty" (V, 145). It is built right into it. For the sovereign asserts the right to act on his own, unilaterally, regardless of the will of the majority. He only answers to laws that he gives himself, which means that he only goes along with the will of the majority if the majority agrees with him. The sovereign reserves the right to make an exception of himself and does not give his will over to the common will, thus withdrawing from the circle of democracy, in order to stand apart. The sovereign does not let go; he does not share (*partager*) his power (V, 73 ff.); he does not make gifts or expenditures without return. That means that the very idea of sovereignty cannot withstand the withering white light of what Derrida has been calling since 1989 the "democracy to come," a democracy all the way down, which is a democracy *without being* (*sans l'être*), for being does not extend as far as this democracy, which is still to come. That means, as we will see shortly, that any sovereign nation is a rogue!

To speak of the symbiosis of the democracy to come and of the God to come means that they both belong to the same future (*l'avenir*), to the same coming (*venir*), to the same structure of the *à venir*. They are coming together; they will arrive arm in arm, like traveling companions, carried over (*metaphorein*) on the same vehicle. But why should we bother ourselves with such an impossible

some vulnerability, some powerlessness, but there you see that the powerlessness of come is also a sign of the almighty. I'm trying to think of some divinity dissociated from power, if it is possible. This would have heavy ethical and political consequences, but it would deserve a long, much longer answer."

democracy, which does not do us the courtesy of even existing, when the problems that beset existing democracies are so pressing? It is not so much that we are bothering with it as that it is bothering with us. For it is calling us, provoking us, disturbing our sleep, keeping democratic hearts up at night. We find ourselves always already in the train of its solicitation, disturbed by a call that calls upon us before we call upon it. If it does not have the structure of being, that is because it has the structure of a call from beyond being to which being, always breathless, cannot catch up. If we dare not say of this democracy that "it is" we cannot avoid saying that "it calls;" we cannot silence its ringing in our ears. It calls because it promises. There is something astir in the word "democracy," something "promised," something we can hardly resist, something "unconditional." Still, if it is irresistible, then is it not an irresistible force? Shall we then say that "democracy" is a word of sovereign force and power, nay, even a word of divine authority? That would be to fall down before the old god, the one that belongs to the order of being and power, whereas Derrida is venturing out onto more uncharted seas, trying to think god otherwise, trying to tell a whole new story about God (V, 215-16), about some sort of vulnerable, non-sovereign, suffering God, some sort of "force without force" or some "power of powerlessness," for which we have no concept.

Derrida is dreaming of something unconditional, something for which the current conditions of being are no match, something that belongs to another order, that of the call or the promise. The unconditionality of the democracy to come thus is not that of unconditional force but the unconditionality of a promise that has not compromised with the conditions of being. For Derrida—and this is something residually phenomenological about deconstruction—we today find ourselves always already in the world on the receiving end of an uncompromisable promise that we have inherited. We are constituted by such promises, summoned by their voice. Something, which is not a thing, lays an unconditional *claim* upon us—*uns in Anspruch nehmen*, as Heidegger would say—not as a sovereign power in the order of being that invades and overpowers us, but as a summons that provokes us, a call that incites us, a promise that lures us and awakens our desire. Something of unconditional appeal, without the force of sovereignty. Might not something be—without being—of unconditional import or value, might something not be—without being—the object of an unconditional desire or love? Might it not make an unconditional claim upon us without overpowering us, without belonging to the order of being and power and force? Might it not lay claim to us from beyond being, luring being on—to come?

We are inching closer to the democracy to come, and inching closer to the coming God. But what might that be like? Let us attempt a risky analogy. Let us assume that the promise belongs to the order of the "good," while force and

power are attendant upon “being,” running the risk of using very classical terms of the sort that Derrida usually sets out to disturb. On this analogy we cast Derrida in the Neoplatonic and Levinasian terms of a good beyond being, a good that does not exist because being does not reach as far as the good, a good that is beyond being from excess, where being always and already falls short of the good. It is not so much that the good fails to be as that being fails short of the good; the good does not fail the test of being, but being fails the test of the good. The good rises up like a command from the ashes of being. The good is without being, but this “without” is not the name of a lack but an excess. On this analogy, what Derrida is calling the “unconditional” belongs to the order of the Platonic and Neoplatonic Good while sovereignty belongs to the order of being.

But that is no more than an analogy, and of limited use, because were it to hold in a more rigorous way, then the democracy to come would not represent a call for a revolution but would simply be a recall, a repetition of the classical doctrine of Plato and Christian Neoplatonism. For the call that in a certain way is certainly coming from Plato, who is our inescapable heritage, is not the call of the Good in the *Republic* (509), where the Good is articulated as an ultimate sovereign power, as a king (*kurios*) in its own kingdom (*basileia*), the very knowledge of which entitles one to rule. Plato’s Good is not the power of powerlessness but a power more powerful than power, sovereign and superlative, which imposes an analogical and hierarchical order upon its sensible subordinates, which is the very stuff of sovereignty. The Good is the super-powerful origin of the reason that is right about everything and gets the better of everything (*a raison de tout*). It reigns with all the majesty and dignity of the father of all, of the *arche*. Plato has supplied us with the fundamental vocabulary of the onto-theological politics of sovereignty (V, 193-94). Nor is the call for the democracy to come, which comes along with a coming God, a recall or rehearsal of Christian Neoplatonism. For the “unconditional” for Derrida is not the name of a *hyperousios*, a hyper-being beyond or higher than being, a Godhead beyond God (*Gottheit über Gott*), not if Derrida “rightly passes for an atheist.” Far from being a hyperbeing what Derrida calls the unconditional call is perfectly capable of being described as a ghost, as a shade or a specter, a demi-being, not real enough to do anything but able only to haunt us with uncanny possibilities, above all, the haunting possibility of the impossible.⁵

What Derrida has in mind by the unconditional is neither a hyperpower nor a hyperbeing, neither the form of the Good nor God the Father Almighty, but the power of powerlessness, the power of a powerless solicitation or promise or

⁵ This is of course the dominant trope of Derrida’s *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

provocation, which in Derrida's discourse belongs not to the metaphysically loaded and prestigious category of the "good beyond being" but to the humble sphere of the "perhaps," the *peut-être* threatening to irrupt from within and to disturb the conditions of *être*,⁶ the dangerous perhaps of the possibility of the impossible that solicits us from afar. His "unconditional" is constituted not as a being beyond being but as a "call" coming from beyond being to something unconditional or the unconditional call to something beyond being—here the democracy to come. Not a form or a being but a promise without the power to keep its promise, a call without the force to enforce what it calls for, a call whose realization is exposed to all the hazards of the *khora*, which is the opposite end of the kingly line that starts at the top with the Good. Of the democracy—or the God—who is to come we would not say "it is" but "it calls," which is how "it comes." It calls without the worldly wherewithal to enforce its demands or to be enforced, to create the concrete entitative conditions in the world in which its unconditional appeal would be realized. Derrida's unconditional belongs to the order of the call, to the order of the order or command, but not to the order of existing authorities (*exousiai*) or entitative conditions. Nor is its unconditional call a categorical imperative, for it lacks the imperial authority to be an imperative, so it is not of Kantian lineage either.

What then? How can the democracy to come call upon us without power or force or authority? A trace of what Derrida means is found in Levinas's famous example of the impossibility of murder. "Thou shalt not kill" is the first word, that is, it is a command inscribed on the face of the other, and in that sense comes from "on high," but it comes not with the majesty of worldly height or power, or with the authority of a divine command or of a command of pure reason, but with the penury of the most helpless and vulnerable one. It is inscribed on the face of anyone, but most palpably on the face of the helpless victim. Thus, the impossibility of murder is a law in the order of the call, but not alas of being where it is an all too banal and common fact. Derrida uses hospitality as an example of unconditionality without sovereignty, where he means the appeal made by the wayfarer, the stranger, the immigrant, e.g.—who has not the wherewithal to lay down his head, who lacks the power to defend him or herself, whose only defense is defenselessness, the power of powerlessness, the appeal to the good (V, 204). The call of hospitality calls unconditionally however helpless and humble the real conditions under which the call is issued. So too the call of and for the democracy to come, of and for the coming God, is issued from the face of the street people, and in that sense from a certain *voyou*.

⁶ "University," 234; Derrida, "As If It Were Possible, 'Within Such Limits'..." in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews*, ed. and trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 343-70.

But the call is not simply negative, a prohibition of violence or murder, but an affirmative call, the call for something unconditional to happen. When something occurs for which the conditions are already in place, something made possible by these conditions and conventions, then nothing really “happens” in the strong sense. When someone comes who has been invited, who made an exclusive short list, that is not hospitality; hospitality happens only when the uninvited one shows up at our door. Only the impossible can really happen.⁷ Only the impossible, only the coming God, can save us. The theological dream in the dream of the democracy to come, the “unavowed theologeme,” is the God not of traditional ontotheology, nor of Christian Platonism, nor the Aristotelian First Mover, who like the Platonic Good is the purity of power. Who can deny, Derrida asks, that his notion of a sovereignty to come in which justice and law would have been combined might go under the name of the god mentioned in Heidegger’s “*Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten*,” a god to come who will come to somehow save us (V, 155-56; PTT, 190n14)? Allow me to say, in fear and trembling, that I for one can deny it. I am willing to cast my sole vote in the minority and deny it. For it is only half true. Remember, this is the author’s avowal of his “unavowed,” his authorial intention to say what is unintended, to identify what lies unconsciously behind his conscious intentions as an author, of which he is, in principle, at best only half conscious. It is half true, for Derrida’s use of *venir*, *à venir*, *événement*, bears an important analogy to Heidegger’s use of *kommen*, *Zukunft* and *Ereignis*. Hence the very idea of the *à venir*, and of the promise it contains, here the promise of the coming God, in Derrida, has a formal parallel in Heidegger’s notion of a wait or watch or expectation, in this time of the flight of the gods, in which thinking attends to the traces of the coming god, *der zukommende, zukünftliche Gott*, by which Heidegger means the transforming historical event of another beginning. Unlike Osama bin Laden, neither Derrida nor Heidegger is expecting to go to heaven; both are waiting upon an historical transformation or revolution in “this world” (PTT, 114).

But the other half is not true, for the parallel is strictly formal. That is why Derrida concedes that this is a “fanciful interpretation” of Heidegger, one that would have “shocked Heidegger.” So add Derrida’s vote to mine; we both deny it; we are beginning to build a majority. The democracy to come “is certainly not what ‘he [Heidegger] meant’” and he would have regarded – “wrongly,” Derrida adds – the international body that Derrida dreams of as “the absolute technological state,” whereas, for Derrida:

... nothing resembles an ‘absolute technological state’ less than that which I have

⁷ “University,” 234.

spoken about under the terms *faith, messianicity, democracy to come*, the untenable promise of a *just, international institution*, an institution that is strong in justice, *sovereign without sovereignty*, and so on" (PTT, 190n14).

What then *is* the unavowed theologeme in Derrida in a non-fanciful interpretation? Nothing less than the God of the "promise," which is after all a very Jewish and prophetic god, and if the "promise" is also a Heideggerian figure it is Jewish before it is Heideggerian, as Marlène Zarader has shown, Jewish being something that Heidegger would never have any part of, that is to say, never avow, never "think."⁸ For while Heidegger was interested in calling and promises and being laid claim to, he was not interested in being laid claim to by justice. Or, if Heidegger was interested in justice it was the mystified, mythologized justice of all-gathering *dike* that had nothing to do with suffering flesh.⁹ Heidegger was not interested in the justice of the great ungathered and unwashed *demos* which is precisely what interests Derrida—and the Jewish prophets—the justice due the *voyous*, the street people. Despite his ridiculous romanticizing of the wisdom of Schwarzwald farmers, *demos* and *hoi polloi* were definitely not among the words of elemental power in the Greek language upon which Heidegger chose to meditate high up in his *Hütte*. Indeed the God who would come to save us in Heidegger's myth of Being would come to save us *from* democracy, past, present or to come, and the revolution of which Heidegger was dreaming would have been an ultra-right revolution. His god, as he himself pointed out, is the god of the poet, not the biblical god, while Derrida's god is profoundly prophetic.¹⁰ Derrida's "fanciful" interpretation of Heidegger's suspicion of existing democracies depends upon ignoring that Heidegger—who is not convinced that democracy is what is needed in an age of planetary domination (V, 157)—entertains a radically reactionary, aestheticizing and right wing suspicion of democracy. Heidegger's god will deliver less democracy not more, no more democracy (*plus de démocratie*), which is not to be confused with Derrida's own suspicion that there is more to democracy (*plus de démocratie*) than democracy delivers at present. Derrida's unavowed theologeme is much less

⁸ Marlène Zarader, *La dette impensée: Heidegger et l'héritage hébraïque* (Paris: Seuil, 1990).

⁹ I have made this argument in more detail in *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). See Martin Heidegger's Interview with *Der Spiegel*: "Only a God Can Save Us," trans. Maria Alter and John D. Caputo, *Philosophy Today*, 20, no. 4 (Winter, 1976): 267-84.

¹⁰ See Heidegger, "Appendix," *The Piety of Thinking Essays by Martin Heidegger*, trans. and ed. James G. Hart (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 65; for the prophetic reading of Derrida, see Mark Dooley's interview with Jacques Derrida "The Becoming Possible of the Impossible" in *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 21-34 and John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

Heidegger's god of the poets, God forbid, than the prophetic God.¹¹

Still, let us be clear. The unconditional promise by which Derrida is solicited is not to be identified with the covenant made with Abraham and Moses by the Lord God, the One God, blessed be his name, no more than with the philosophemes of Plato or Aristotle,¹² of Kant or Heidegger. Derrida's is a faith without religion or religious institutions, without theocracy and without a church, a faith in the unconditional and the incalculable. But this faith is also what Derrida means by reason (V, 211). Reason is a movement back and forth between the incalculable and the calculable, calculating always in the face of the incalculability, keeping calculability open to the incalculable. While the irrational for Kant lay in allowing reason to be overcome by something other, reason for Derrida is precisely defined by its openness to the other, to the event, to the future, its desire for the incalculable and the unconditional, for the promise. Reason is not measured by consensus, as for Habermas, which would always present a certain closure and compromise, but by the promise, which is open-ended. Reason—in a way that is not entirely foreign to the religious idea that the mind is a *capax dei*, a capacity for God or for the infinite—is defined by Derrida by the promise, which is always infinite, by the possibility of the impossible, by something deeply inscribed in language, for example, if it is an example, the promise lodged in the word "democracy." Derrida's idea of reason is marked by faith, by a faith in reason that belongs to an "Enlightenment to come" (V, 167 ff.), so that the distinction between faith and reason remains porous.

But who is making this promise? Who knows? It is a promise made by who knows whom coming from who knows where and calling to something to-come that is who knows what. But then to whom is it made? To us, to those who hear the word, who have inherited it, in whatever language. What is it promising? Who knows? Who knows what the democracies are coming to or what is coming to democracy or what democracy is to come? It is a promise lodged in language itself, a whisper, a hint of things to come, a trace of a coming god, a promise that

¹¹ See the four points on which Derrida distinguishes *deconstruction* from Heideggerian *Destruktion* in V, 206-207 n2.

¹² Inasmuch as it attracts by desire, without the force of moving or efficient causality, the "promise" of the "to come" can in fact be likened to Aristotle's first cause, which is a *telos* that moves by attracting. But apart from the fact that Aristotle's *telos* is the highest actuality, what Derrida has in mind would be a *telos* without a teleology, without imposing a teleological order, or a final regulative goal to pursue. It moves by way of promoting a kind of endless or atelic restlessness. So it would be at best a *telos* without *telos*. If one could imagine a radical object of desire that does not exist and that does not impose a teleological order, then one would imagine a Derridean correlate to Aristotle's prime mover unmoved, a kind of primary undeconstructible deconstructor. Like Aristotle, and unlike the One God of the great monotheisms, there would be a plurality of such undeconstructibles, as many as there are orders of desire, were there any at all, that is, as many as are desired.

has us before we have it, a promise that is engaged as soon as we are engaged in language, as soon as we open our mouths. The unconditional promise is nobody's speech act, nor is it a hyperbeing of prestigious power, or a word of God, or a categorical command, but a fragile and powerless solicitation awakened in and by language itself in a *khoral* night.

Anything as fetching and as haunting as this "democracy to come" would also be what Derrida calls "undeconstructible," and it would relate to existing and highly deconstructible democracies just the way justice, which is unconditional, is related to the force of law, where laws are always positive and conditional. The democracy to come, *s'il y en a*, is not deconstructible, while existing democratic polities and juridical systems, which enjoy the prestige of being and the power of the possible, are deconstructible. The democracy to come, accordingly, is impossible, *the impossible* (PTT, 134), which solicits us from afar, demanding the impossible of us, as the object of a desire beyond desire for something unforeseeable to come. That alone should be enough to tell us that "deconstruction" is the least bad word for a profoundly affirmative undertaking to unearth the most deeply buried and unfulfilled promises lodged in our least bad words—words like "justice" and "democracy," the "gift" and "forgiveness," "friendship" and "hospitality." These are the words that Derrida has analyzed more and more in recent years in what some would say represents an ethico-political turn in deconstruction, although he protests the idea that this is all something new (V, 64). But these are also words of such undeniable *biblical* resonance that they bring his unavowed theologeme more and more to the level of an explicit confession or circumfession.

What does the democracy to come call for? If the call comes from the heart of a promise lodged deep within the word democracy, and if it calls to us democrats who are not yet democrats, what does it say? Like any call of conscience worthy of the name, in Heidegger or Levinas, say, it pronounces us guilty, guilty of being the basis of a nullity, of not yet being democrats, infinitely responsible to respond to the call to be or become democratic, asking us to put off the old way and to turn around. O my democratic friends, there are no democrats.¹³ Derrida addresses modern democracies like Kierkegaard—whom he is always following (PTT, 135)—addressing Christendom: they are both faced with the task of disabusing their audiences of the illusion that they already are Christian or democrats and that becoming Christian or democratic is just what is being asked of them. So in asking us to turn around, the democracy to come calls for a revolution, one more revolution (at least) beyond the first wave of democratic

¹³ In *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London and New York: Verso, 1997), Derrida thus adapts the saying attributed to Aristotle by Diogenes Laertius, "oh my friends, there are no friends."

revolutions. That brings us to politics.

I have used the figure of a symbiotic system because Derrida's reflections in *Voyous* and elsewhere are so much guided by the figure of life itself, of the health (*santé*) of living things, of keeping them safe (*sauf*), in a salutary state (*salut*), hale and whole. It is in keeping with this figure that he says that democracy today is suffering from an auto-immune disease, redeploying a figure he first used in "Faith and Reason."¹⁴ Democracy today is a victim of the "strange illogical logic" by which a living thing destroys the very thing that is meant to fortify (*munis*) it against attack by a foreign body (V, 173). The result is that instead of attacking the other, it attacks itself and tolerates or plays host to the presence of the aggressor. So democracies often think that if, as a practical matter, they are to survive, they must make themselves safe from democracy and learn how to tolerate anti-democratic forces within their own bodies. Thus, in order to make the American way of life safe against the threat of terrorists who threaten democracy, Attorney General John Ashcroft wants to abridge the democratic rights of American citizens (V, 64-65), or the rights of prisoners being held in Guantanamo Bay, even as the Rehnquist court has seen fit to profoundly abridge the civil liberties of Americans to keep the streets of democracy safe. When, in 1992, the Algerian government saw that the elections were going to result in the election of an anti-democratic Islamic party that would abolish democracy, it suspended a democratically held election in the name of democracy, which means a place where the people enjoy the right to choose their own leaders (V, 54 ff.). That of course is nothing new. When Salvador Allende was democratically elected in Chile, Henry Kissinger said that the United States was not going to let the interests of democracy (read: the United States) be injured by a lot of damn fools (a loose translation of *demos*) in Chile expressing their democratic will for a socialist president. Everybody knows that you cannot trust democracy, which has a suicidal side that we have to protect it against (V, 57). Auto-immunity is thus a kind of *pharmakon* (PTT, 124), when the body is poisoned by the very drug that is meant to save it. An absolute democracy could bring a democratic end to democracy; that risk is built right into democracy. The National Socialists were democratically elected. The art of governing democratically is to know when democracy should suppress its own immunities to the undemocratic and attack itself (*autos*)—in the interests of democracy, of course.

Or of America! Of our own self-interest, the interest of our "self" (*autos*), the interests of a "sovereign" nation (under God)? God bless America. But the very idea of a democracy is to divide and share (*partager*) sovereignty among the

¹⁴ See "Faith and Reason," trans. Samuel Weber, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 40-101; and PTT, 94 ff..

people. To have faith in democracy is to trust and have faith in the many, to give up the rule of the sovereign one or few and share it among the many, among the “people,” come what may. To be true to the idea of democracy demands that we be unselfish, that we give up our attachment to our own private will. Democracy cannot be achieved without the anxiety, the fear and the trembling, that accompanies every sacrifice, above all the sacrifice of the self, which is at bottom what every sacrifice must be. So if we were true to this idea of democracy, we would end up with another and more radical idea of *auto-immunity*, one that is not simply self-destructive but rather breaks down the “ipseity” of the “self,” its mastery and autonomy (V, 71), in order to open the self to sharing with “the other.”¹⁵ That in turn would require a revolutionary turn, in which we would reverse the model that democracy follows from one of autonomy to one of “heteronomy” (V, 154), where the one would agree to be governed by the many, the self by the others, those among whom one is too. The symbiotic effect of undoing the idea of political sovereignty would be to have redescribed the autonomous self in terms of the other in the self, as a self that is not identical with itself, a self that is always already divided within itself, inhabited by the other, a complex of many selves. The self itself then would turn out to be a kind of democratic polity, the unruly rule of the many, a certain kind of “mob-rule,” a *voyocracy*, which is a possible translation of the Greek word *demokratia* (V, 97). If we immunize ourselves against the sovereign self, if we are *sui-cidal* about this sovereign *sui*, or “*sui-sovereignty*,” democracy will not have to put up with this pseudo-democracy, the self-aborting auto-immunizing fake that passes itself off for democracy today. Auto-immunity then will mean the right to criticize *oneself* (V, 126).

This is not just abstract theory. This is all about September 11, all about politics today. During the cold war, things were maximally dangerous but perfectly clear. Two large sovereign superpowers guided by the “MAD” logic of “mutual assured destruction” kept each other more or less in check. Occasionally, most notably in the Cuban missile crisis, we stared into the abyss. But for the most part, sovereign nations guided by self-interest are not suicidal and it proved to be in the best interests of each to respect the space of the other. This absurdist logic worked and produced a simulacrum of peace, a lack of war that seemed at times almost as much like war as peace. When the cold war ended, things became more complicated, but no less dangerous, its place taken by the war on international terrorism, and on what “we” call the “rogue states” that finance, support and harbor terrorists. Not a war between superpowers, but between the

¹⁵ Derrida works out this argument (V, 67 ff) by accepting the spirit but worrying over the letter of Jean-Luc Nancy’s revisioning of freedom in *the Experience of Freedom*, trans. Bridget McDonald (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); he comments especially on pp. 70-71.

respectable, legitimate states that respect international law (the true and the good) and the evil empire, the axis of evil, the “rogues,” the outlaws, the hooligans, who have no respect for law or life, “MAD” now having given way to “WMD” (concealed “weapons of mass destruction”)

Or so it seemed. September 11, 2001 shattered that illusion. With the collapse of the twin towers, the whole facade of a “war” on rogue “states” also collapsed. Now it is clear that the “enemy” is no longer an identifiable “state” with diplomats and a capital city, but elusive bands of faceless, stateless terrorists willing to sacrifice their lives to take out large buildings, the Pentagon and the White House itself, and to poison or kill countless numbers of innocent people in large cities with suicidal stealth. The classical concepts of war too had fallen. The collapse of the towers exposes the deeper anxiety that simmers beneath the bravado of a “war” on the “rogue states.” The second Gulf War was an effective way to prop up that illusion—Derrida wrote this book in 2002, before the war—not to mention to enhance the standing with the people for a president seeking re-election in a coming presidential campaign. But the cold truth is, after the end of the cold war, the rogue states are not *states* (V, 148-151, 212-14; PTT, 98, 101, 110-11). They are faceless terrorists hiding who knows where, in disguise, somewhere in Somalia, say, and a thousand other places, and if they get their hands on weapons of mass destruction, ones that they can conceal on their person, or in a vehicle, God help us all. We knew where Moscow was and we could train our missiles on the precise place, but we do not know who or where these people are. But by the same token, the legitimate states are precisely the ones who assert their sovereign and unilateral right to act in their own interests.

As Bill Clinton said in his 1993 address to the United Nations, the United States will act multilaterally when possible, but unilaterally when necessary (V, 147), whether or not we have the authorization of the UN General Assembly or even the Security Council, which we can usually control, whether or not we are in defiance of international law or human rights. But that is *precisely* what one means by an outlaw state, with no respect for international law, that is, a rogue state. Derrida says, “So there are no longer any rogue states and there are only rogue states” (V, 150)—that is, the rogues are not *states*, and the states are *rogues* (by exercising sovereignty, the self-styled legitimate states behave like rogues). Being a rogue is built right into being sovereign; it is pretty much what one means by a rogue state (V, 214). There are more rogues than you think, the USA first, then the UK, then France, if you just count how many times these sovereign states exercised their veto power in the Security Council on behalf of their national-sovereign-interests. The powers that be, the *exousiai*, that shaped the United Nations saw to it that the UN is another one of those democracies that has immunized itself against democracy. It has done this by establishing a Security Council whose principal function is to insure the security of the most powerful

few against the democratic many in the General Assembly. The Security Council serves to secure the sovereignty of the five permanent members. Why just those five? Because they were winners of the last world war. Might makes right. The *strongest* reason, *la raison du plus fort*, prevails, not the *strongest reason*.

To be sure, the very idea of the democracy to come is not just utopic but aporetic, for simply to submit national sovereignty to the higher authority of an international body would be once again to leave the place of sovereignty standing and to repopulate it, not with a king or nation state, but with a world state. This would not dispel the notion of sovereignty but reconstitute a new figure of universal or world sovereignty (PTT, 115). We would have dissipated, disseminated or distributed sovereignty still more widely—from the king to the nation, from the nation to the community of nations—but the end result would be a sovereign mega-state of just the sort that Kant and Hannah Arendt rejected. For Derrida the “democracy to come” would not be a world-state, which would or could be in many ways even more terrifying than anything of which a national sovereignty is capable.¹⁶ No system of law, no legal sovereignty or mega-sovereignty, however widely based, would embody justice or be “the last word” (PTT, 115). The democracy to come could never take a purely legal or juridical form, as a system of law (*droit*), for it would always be without being as demand of justice. As such, the democracy to come would be a-cosmopolitan or post-cosmopolitan, admitting at most of a certain “sovereignty without sovereignty,” some kind of force or power—since force or power is what constitutes the law—some sort of *kratia*, in which, *per impossibile*, justice would have the force of law, and the law would be just, not manipulated or ignored at will by the most powerful nations. That is the impossible, the promise inscribed in the word democracy, on which no existing world body can deliver (PTT, 119-20). The promise inscribed in the “democracy to come” is bound up with the promise inscribed in the words “united nations,” a body to come that would be free of the hegemonic influence of its most powerful members, with a “wholly other” security council (V, 161), on which the present world body cannot deliver because of the roguish behavior of the sovereign powers on the security council. But the promise is astir in these words which at least point us in the right direction, which gives us the right “heading.” Derrida in fact thinks that this is very much a “European promise,” as Giovanna Borradori puts it.¹⁷ He thinks

¹⁶ In the wildly popular Christian fundamentalist apocalyptic *Left Behind* series of Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, the first and pivotal thing undertaken by the anti-Christ, the very antipode of the messianic peace, is the establishment of a world government engineered through a take over of the United Nations and the disarmament of the member states.

¹⁷ See Giovanna Borradori in PTT, 169-72 in her helpful commentary “Deconstructing Terrorism: Derrida” in PTT, 137-72. See also *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

that there is more to hope for in this regard from Europe than from the United States, which is insufficiently secularized, still too dominated by a pledged allegiance to Judaic and Christian religion, so that its “war on terrorism” is a still marked by a religious war of Jewish and Christian doctrine against Islam, a war of “two political theologies,” both Abrahamic, a war among the Messianisms of which Jerusalem is the symbolic center. Even though this movement of secularization is still incomplete and relatively unfulfilled in Europe, the Enlightenment ideal of extricating the political order from religious authority is more advanced there and the Enlightenment has made more headway (PTT, 116-117).¹⁸

The question, is there something that lays claim to us unconditionally but without power or force, is directed at “us,” all of us—Americans and Europeans, democrats and theologians, Westerners and non-Westerners—*anyone* who is associated with the cruel logic of sovereignty. The democracy to come calls for a new revolution, another and still more radically democratic revolution, a revolution in the name of the democracy to come, in which we will break more decisively still with the *ancien régime* of sovereignty itself, dreaming of the incalculable possibility of the impossible, of a democracy without sovereignty. Dreaming of the incalculable, but also calculating, because one must count very carefully and carefully devise ways of counting how the member voices of the democratic assembly will count, who will be allowed to vote, at what age, with what status, etc. (V, 63). That revolution that is being called for will also cut deeply into our psyche and our psychology, because it will force us to reconceive the self, that famous liberal individual, in terms of the other one who lays claims to me, even as it will cut into our theology, because it will force us to reimagine God without sovereignty. God forbid!

What is called for in and by the democracy to come is the unconditional gift, which does not seek a return on one’s investment, the gift, in which the self gives up its power, the power of the “I can,” the power of the possible, which is what constitutes a self. What we have asked of the king, we now must ask of ourselves: to give up power, to share and divide it. What is called for is a self that

¹⁸ We should not mistake the sense in which Derrida associates himself with the idea of secularization. He embraces the critical attitude cultivated by the Enlightenment with regard to the political hegemony of *religious doctrines*—the concrete messianisms—over the political order. But then he adds parenthetically—but “notice I am not saying with regard to religion or faith” (PTT, 116-17) itself, that is, with regard to the messianic. That is because the very idea of the democracy to come takes the form of a faith in a pure messianicity, the very idea of a to come, which indicates that his position more precisely stated is post-secular. His idea of a pure *à venir*, a pure messianic, remains residually and deeply Abrahamic; it is not a Buddhist idea, for example, where peace has to do with the excising of desire, recognizing the unreality of the past and the future, and allowing oneself to be saturated with the present.

shares its power in a gift without return, a self without ipseity. What is called for is unconditional hospitality to the other, to the stranger and the immigrant, to the tired, the hungry and huddled masses. What is called for is a transforming and transfixing revolution in which the self turns itself inside out and lets itself be claimed by the other.

What is called for is to imagine God otherwise, to turn our thinking about God around, almost upside down or inside out:

In speaking of an onto-theology of sovereignty, I refer, under the name of God, of One God, to the determination of a sovereign and hence indivisible omnipotence. But when the name of God would give us something else to think, for example a vulnerable non-sovereignty, suffering and divisible, mortal even, capable of contradicting himself, of regret (a thought which is neither impossible nor without example), that would be a wholly other story and perhaps that of a god who would be deconstructed even in his ipseity. (V, 215-216)

What calls, what is calling, what is called for is the God to come, the coming of a God to save us, a God who has no seat of power, no sovereign authority, no ontological prestige, vulnerable and mortal, who has not the wherewithal to lay down his head, whose only power is the power of a powerless but unconditional appeal.

"The democracy to come—*salut.*" (V, 161)

The God to come—*viens, oui, oui.*

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Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory 4.3 (August 2003)